

The End

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“The End” Pilgrim Church UCC October 26, 2014 (Deuteronomy 34:1-12)

Today is the end of our two month journey with Moses. As some of you said to me along the way, "Are we still in Exodus?" and I responded, "The Israelites wandered for 40 years, pretty sure we can handle a few more weeks around here." Though we are at the end—with the death of Moses in the final chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, the last of the five books of the Torah. Moses, despite all his struggles with God and the people, is rewarded with remarkable praise at the end of his life: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform."<sup>[1]</sup>

To end our journey with Moses, we'll focus on three lasting lessons about leadership and life from this final chapter of the Torah.<sup>[2]</sup> Lesson One: there's freedom in focusing on our gifts and strengths not just our failures and weaknesses. Lesson Two: nobody in leadership is irreplaceable. And Lesson Three: the community's future is more important than the leader's future.

It's easy to hear the last chapter of the Torah, ask why Moses can't go onto the Promised Land, and feel upset by this injustice. There are explanations earlier in Deuteronomy and Numbers, that Moses broke faith with God when he brought forth water from the rocks at Meribah by striking them with his staff instead of speaking to the rocks as God had asked. Moses took credit for the miracle and didn't praise God for working through him, so God tells Moses that he can't move onto the Promised Land with the people he's been leading for all these years.

It's simple to focus on Moses' failures—it wasn't a great leadership moment, not very humble, and he didn't listen to directions from God. There are consequences—with Moses looking out on the land and not being able to cross over there. But freedom can come in focusing on Moses' gifts. At various points, Moses was asked to serve in roles we could call prophet, priest, military commander, and king. Who can possibly be good at fulfilling every role? We can look at Moses' moment of weakness, but what about his gifts and the roles he played best perhaps not being what the people needed at this new moment in their life together?

In our modern context, we can look to Strengths-Based Psychology. Donald Clifton discovered that overcoming deficits and weaknesses is deeply ingrained in our American culture. We love underdogs. Further, if you struggled in school or your child is struggling in school, we focus on tutoring in the subject area that's hardest and doesn't come naturally. But how would it change things if we focused on building upon our talents and not on overcoming our weaknesses? Clifton did all this research and said, let's build on our strengths, that it's not true that you can be anything you want, but you can be a whole lot more of who you already are. Strengths-Based Psychology focuses on our natural talents that are unique to each of us. If you can add skills, knowledge, and practice to your inherent talents—you will be successful and happy.<sup>[3]</sup>

Maybe Moses wasn't the greatest military commander or priest or king. The people needed someone with different talents to lead them on. But at the end of his life, we hear that he was the greatest prophet Israel has ever known. Moses and God had such a close relationship that Moses had unmediated access to God that no one else had enjoyed before. And yet this new

generation needs a new leader. Moses turns to Joshua and ordained him with God's help— blessing Joshua to lead God's people and he became a gifted military commander. We can't be all things to all people and there is freedom in focusing on our strengths and the gifts we do have to offer.

Lesson two is simply that no one in leadership is irreplaceable. It's easy to see this today as Moses the old man who still has many talents yields his authority and power to Joshua, who is full of the spirit of wisdom. We see this in every election cycle. People come and go from public offices. When a politician has been particularly good we may think that no one can possibly replace them. And yet a new person will fulfill that leadership role. It's on us as voters to decide who's best for the job.

The political ads I've seen the most this time around concern the race for Governor of Massachusetts and Senator of New Hampshire. Jeanne Shaheen and Scott Brown went after each other in a debate this week with Shaheen telling Brown that she doesn't think of New Hampshire as a consolation prize. She's the incumbent, he's vying for her Senate seat so she'll either stay in office or leave. Obviously Scott Brown knows this story as he himself was unseated by Elizabeth Warren. Yet, it's not like no one else could possibly be the Senator of New Hampshire or Massachusetts or the Governor of Massachusetts or any other open political position when the time comes for folks to leave office. Leaders, even good leaders, are replaced all the time.

Whenever someone says, "Oh you have big shoes to fill" my mentor has always replied, "I bring my own shoes." So not only are leaders replaceable, they will come into their new roles with their own shoes, as it should be. Joshua doesn't try to be a prophet like Moses. Instead, Joshua gets told by God, "I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put the people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them."<sup>[4]</sup> It's Joshua's role, with his own sandals on his feet, to be a diplomat and military leader. In time, Joshua is the military ideal for the kings of Israel. If we think about Presidents like George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, or Dwight Eisenhower—we have our American version of this ideal. In our terms we would say that they were notable Commanders in Chief. Yet no matter how successful, no matter what that leader's particular talents happen to be—no leader is irreplaceable.

Lesson three is that the future of the community is more important than the leader's future. The people mourn Moses' death for thirty days—they weep, they tell stories about how much he meant to them, they recall the lessons he taught, they remember all the good times they had together and probably some of the bad times. But then they pack up and move onto the Promised Land with Joshua leading the way. The community mourns and "then the period of mourning for Moses was ended."<sup>[5]</sup>

Even God gives Moses a chance to mourn the change in leadership. What if God and Moses hanging out on Mt. Nebo is intended to give Moses the chance to say goodbye, to see that these people have a bright future ahead and they're going to be alright even after Moses dies? The leadership change doesn't mean that everything comes to a standstill for the Israelites, it doesn't mean that God doesn't have amazing things in store for them. The focus isn't supposed to be solely on the leader anyway, the focus is on God and God's covenant with God's people.<sup>[6]</sup>

Thinking of how this plays out today, let me just say that megachurch pastors tend to drive me crazy. Often my issues are theological, but I just fundamentally believe that it's dangerous for any church to revolve around one individual. Unless that individual is Jesus Christ. When churches have a pastor, not the church's vision and mission, but the pastor at the center (and this is often how megachurches work)—the church crumbles when there's a crisis or when the

pastor leaves. The latest megachurch and pastor to face this is Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. Driscoll resigned this month after being accused of plagiarism and bullying, with a domineering style of leadership. He's an Evangelical Christian and has preached sexism and homophobia for years. Driscoll also made a pseudonym online and would post awful comments in church forums about feminism, homosexuality, and feminized, emasculated men. When we drove by one of the Mars Hill churches in Seattle this summer, well it's wasn't pretty as I raged to Maureen and Scott in the car. The congregation, spread out among a few campuses, has gone from 14,000 to around 8,000 in weekly attendance as they deal with this crisis and several churches have already closed.[7] I'm sorry to say that this is what happens when any church rallies around one pastor as opposed to learning and growing and being disciples of Jesus Christ together.

In the end, we can learn so much about leadership and life today from Moses' story in the final chapter of the Torah. There is freedom in focusing on our gifts and strengths, not just our failures and weaknesses. We can't be all things to all people, but we can be a whole lot more of who we already are. Moreover, nobody in leadership is irreplaceable. We see that clearly in Joshua guiding God's people onto the Promised Land. The people turned to the ideal diplomat and military leader, having been led as far as they could go with Moses the prophet. And the community's future is more important than the leader's future. In Christian terms, Jesus had better be at the center of the church and being disciples of Christ as a community is everything. Thus ends the remarkable tales of Moses, a truly amazing prophet whom God knew face to face. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Deuteronomy 34:10-11, NRSV.

[2] Timothy F. Simpson, "The Politics of Being Replaced—Deuteronomy 34:1-12" October 20, 2014 <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-being-replaced-deu...>

[3] Tom Rath, Strengths Finder 2.0.

[4] Joshua 1:5-6.

[5] Exodus 34:8.

[6] Timothy F. Simpson, "The Politics of Being Replaced—Deuteronomy 34:1-12" October 20, 2014 <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-being-replaced-deu...>

[7] Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Mark Driscoll Resigns: Mars Hill Church Pastor Steps Down Following Controversy," October 15, 2014, Religion News Service, featured on The Huffington Post, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/15/mark-driscoll-resigns\\_n\\_5991998...](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/15/mark-driscoll-resigns_n_5991998...)